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Eland's "Eleven presidents: Promises vs. results in achieving limited government" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Eland, I. *Eleven presidents: Promises vs. results in achieving limited government*. Oakland, CA: Independent Institute, 2017. 384 pp. \$25.00. ISBN 9781598133066

Eleven presidents is a work of small-government conservatism, as well as a modern history informed by libertarian philosophy. Ivan Eland is a defense analyst with wide experience, and Director of the Center for Peace Studies at the Independent Institute in California.

Eland's book owes a great deal to libertarian political thought. It is most influenced by the journalist Isobel Paterson's work entitled, *The god in the machine*. Its central theme is that 20th century Republican presidents, excepting Harding, Coolidge and Eisenhower, sort of, talked up small government, but while in office, all of them expanded the government. Eland makes excellent points about the various factors that drive government expansion. Military actions expand the government more than any degree of social spending, and Republican presidents especially in recent years, have engaged in more armed conflict. Both political parties exhibit odd blind spots regarding the true cost of their favored kinds of government spending. Fascination with military action seems to be a particular weakness of certain Republican Party factions, bringing to mind the German proverb, "He who wages war fishes with a golden net." This work could thus be profitably read alongside other new works such as the work by Rosa Brooks entitled: *How everything became war and the military became everything*.

Each president gets one chapter in this work, except that Harding, who died in office, and subsequently is folded together with Coolidge. Harding and Coolidge earn his greatest admiration for their consistent avoidance of foreign adventures, and their reduction of government spending to stimulate the economy. Democratic presidents Carter, Clinton, and Obama also get credit for reducing government, largely because they presided over draw-downs from armed conflicts. Among Republicans, only Eisenhower reduced government spending, by reducing the military after the Korean conflict, and by holding the line against new social spending. Ronald Reagan is the most excoriated President here, because his military spending and government expansion of social services were the most at odds with his small-government rhetoric.

It is said that the work of all Washington policy experts should be subtitled *If only they had listened to me*. Mr. Eland sometimes sinks to that level, second-guessing his subjects' decisions far too confidently. Nevertheless, Eland's book is a valuable alternative perspective to conventional political wisdom.

Reviewer

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